Sorority and Stigmatized Women in Wollstonecraft's Wrongs of Woman and Gaskell's Ruth

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A

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Abstract

This paper explores sorority and stigmatized women in Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel Wrongs of Woman and Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth. The paper begins with a discussion of women's relationships in literature and the ways in which these representations have been limited by a dominant patriarchal literary tradition. The paper is organized to show the influence Wollstonecraft had on Gaskell's work, with particular regards to the characters' relationships with "fallen women." In each text, the women struggle against literary and social plots that threaten to overpower their identities. Wollstonecraft's Jemima is re-worked into Gaskell's Jemima, a woman who challenges and rejects the attitudes that isolate marked women from society as she articulates new ways of seeing the plot of the so-called "fallen woman." Wollstonecraft and Gaskell ultimately offer a valorized vision of sorority.

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Sorority and Stigmatized Women in Wollstonecraft's The Wrongs of Woman and Gaskell's Ruth

All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of ficticious [sic] women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. There is an attempt at it in Diana of the Crossways. They are confidantes, of course, in Racine and the Greek tragedies. They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose.

-- from Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own

Women's friendship in literature is a theme that, until recently, has not received a great deal of attention. So often in literature the heterosexual relationship takes precedence: romantic entanglements and match-making, marriages and elopements comprise the bulk of many poems and novels. As Virginia Woolf indicates, female characters are most often seen through the eyes of the men rather than through the eyes of other women. And, indeed, when we do encounter one woman's perception of another, it is often still with regard to a man. Certainly this is a consequence of social factors: out of the necessity to secure a marriage, women become rivals for male attention.

However little attention women's friendships have received, women's relationships with members of their own sex are pivotal. Young girls look to other women for guidance and to imitate their behavior. From a young age they watch and learn how to react from their mothers' and other women's examples. Patterns of behavior are formed at an early age, and these patterns instruct women on how they should act and react, not only to men but to other women as well. If, as Woolf points out, literature lacks depictions of women's friendships, then we are missing a significant

aspect of a woman's experience. However, as early as the 1790s, women writers trying to write against the social injustice women experienced were discovering that the relationship between women is complex and problematic. Not only were women oppressed by the patriarchy, but also, just under the surface, women were turning against each other in a sub-system just as cruel. Writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Gaskell attempted, in their works, to tell women's stories through women's eyes. Some ground-breaking work has been done on the literary tradition of women's friendships. In her book Women's Friendships in Literature Janet Todd disagrees with Woolf's complaint that literature rarely depicts female friendship. Todd acknowledges, however, that this friendship is often only on the periphery of the plot, although "she [the confidante] may usurp the center when the perspective on action is changed" (1). Indeed, a focused study of the dynamics between female characters reveals much about women's friendships that may have been previously overlooked.[1]

Virtually any discussion of the history of a feminist literary tradition includes an allusion to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Both in her own time and after

her death, Wollstonecraft's ideas and writings have inspired comment. Whether her readers applauded her or criticized her, reactions to Wollstonecraft seem never to be dispassionate. Claudia Johnson calls Wollstonecraft a "revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time" and writes that she "took up and lived out not only the liberal call for women's education, but also virtually all of the other related, violently contested questions of the 1790's" (Cambridge 1).

Many factors contributed to Wollstonecraft's unfavorable reputation and the negative reception of her work in the years following her death. In 1798 Wollstonecraft's husband William Godwin published her Posthumous Works, including The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria, "The Cave of Fancy", and her letters to Imlay. Despite what may have been good intentions, the biography William Godwin published had a negative impact on the public. If her unconventional lifestyle was not enough to turn the public away, then perhaps the violent aftermath of the French Revolution, supported initially by Wollstonecraft, was the deciding factor. Whatever the reasons, her "personal life made it increasingly difficult for women writers to invoke Wollstonecraft's writings by name,

although many continued to endorse her ideas" (qtd. in Johnson, Cambridge 155).

What kind of legacy did Mary Wollstonecraft leave for future writers? For future readers? One way to approach this question is to study other female authors' reactions to Wollstonecraft's work. Whereas modern critics claim that Wollstonecraft had "little to no presence in history or literature curricula as recent as a generation ago" (Johnson, Cambridge 1), Wollstonecraft's work did affect private individuals and one writer in particular, Elizabeth Gaskell. Over a decade after Wollstonecraft's death, Elizabeth Gaskell began to write novels, material for which she found readily available in her home, the rapidly industrializing city of Manchester. Gaskell was an active member of her community, volunteering in various charities and assisting the needy. Here, amid the factories and mills, Gaskell did not have to go far to find herself face to face with the significant issues of the Victorian era: poverty, labor laws, long hours, and women and daughters working out of the home. In Ruth, Gaskell takes issue with society's treatment of the "fallen woman."[2]

Gaskell's novels were immediately popular. In her first novel, Mary Barton (1848), Gaskell takes up the

struggles of the working class. Indeed, Mary Barton "made so strong an impression that the public wanted nothing but working class novels from her. Ruth (1853) for all its moral theme, disappointed their expectations" (Cazamian 213). In Ruth Gaskell takes up the subject of a stigmatized woman, a young, orphaned and unwed mother named Ruth. It seems that, though her audience responded favorably to her treatment of the working class, they felt uncomfortable with her unconventional portrayal of the "fallen woman." Though Gaskell does make it clear that Ruth achieves ultimate redemption according to the Christian paradigm, she also spends much time accounting for the socio-economic factors that affect the individual. Perhaps the public's discomfort is in part due to the fact that, in Ruth, society does not escape without blame.

No study of Gaskell's work would be complete without mention of her religious affiliation. Gaskell's Unitarian beliefs were a strong influence on her education, her marriage, and her view of herself as an individual in a troubled society. Gaskell's life was much affected by Unitarian principles from an early age: her father was a Unitarian minister for some time and she herself married a Unitarian minister in 1832. The Unitarians of the Victorian

era were a "singular and distinct community [. . .] unaffected by the crises of faith that shook so many Christians and produced among them a profound and lasting pessimism" and "untouched by the struggle between science and Christian doctrine" (Lansbury 11-12). Due to some unorthodox beliefs held by Unitarians, many Christians viewed the Unitarians as heretics. Indeed, the Unitarians resembled a political group more than a religious community, "radical in temperament and reformers by design" (Lansbury 12). Unitarians believed that every individual, male or female, had a right to an education so that they could become active individuals in society. It follows, then, that the "Unitarians were to be leaders in the movement for women's rights" (Lansbury 13). As a human being and as a woman, Gaskell believed she had a role to fulfill, and in addition to the charity work she regularly performed, writing allowed her to address the socio-economic and religious issues of her day.

While her religious background certainly influenced her writing, it would be an error to dismiss Gaskell's novels as simple stories with predictable morals; rather, her work reveals an author in conflict with many of the current conventions, both social and religious. As she

writes of the social issues affecting her society, Gaskell openly challenges accepted attitudes toward the so-called "fallen woman."

The social and economic struggles facing fallen women were not unfamiliar to Gaskell as she was "an active social-worker among the poorest weavers and the lowest prostitutes in the Manchester slums" (Wheeler 148). Gaskell personally assisted the rehabilitation of several fallen women, often by helping them to emigrate. In her correspondence with Charles Dickens and other friends she writes of offering assistance to unwed mothers and prostitutes. One woman, in particular, is even believed to be the model for Ruth:

> In the letters of Mrs. Gaskell edited by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, there are four letters in which reference is made to the girl, Pasley, whom Mrs. Gaskell visited in prison in Manchester, and later assisted to emigrate to the Cape, and who is thought to have influenced the portrayal of her 'fallen woman' heroine, Ruth Hilton, in Ruth. (Eve 36)

The letters "throw some light on Mrs. Gaskell's sympathetic efforts to assist individuals in trouble. She helped

prostitutes to emigrate, and one girl, Pasley,[is] the model for Ruth Denbigh" (Eve 38). In the novel, the compassionate Rev. Thurston Benson and his sister Faith initially assist Ruth. However, one character in particular extends to Ruth not only her kindness but also her friendship. Jemima Bradshaw is the willful daughter of Mr. Bradshaw, an upper middle-class businessman and pillar of the church. Mr. Bradshaw, unfamiliar with Ruth's past, hires her as a governess to his daughters. Jemima forms a friendship with Ruth before learning of her past, yet after much internal debate she maintains and furthers her friendship with Ruth even after society has ostracized her. This friendship signals an awakened sorority between women that promises to re-tell the conventional plot. Via Jemima, we see Ruth through a woman's eyes and judged on a woman's own terms, not by society's maxims. After Jemima's experience with Ruth, and her struggle to transcend society's prescribed condemnation of the outcast woman, Jemima becomes the sort of sympathetic individual that Gaskell believes is necessary in a world where women such as Ruth strive to reform their lives and better themselves.

Although Wollstonecraft is the social reformer so often labeled radical and unconventional, Elizabeth

Gaskell, a minister's wife writing during the height of Victorian prudery and hypocrisy, manages to build upon Wollstonecraft's Wrongs of Woman to create an equally, if not more, powerful condemnation of the hypocritical state of Victorian society and the deplorable treatment of women. Not only does Gaskell condemn the society that would ostracize her heroine, she brings this condemnation directly into the upper-middle class home of the pillars of the church. Wollstonecraft's Jemima, a proud, yet suspicious survivalist, is re-worked into Gaskell's Jemima: the daughter of a wealthy man who challenges and rejects the attitudes that isolate marked women from society with growing confidence. The promises that Maria made to Jemima in Wrongs of Woman are finally fulfilled in Gaskell's Jemima and Ruth.

In each text the women struggle against the plots contrived by society that threaten to overpower their identities or condemn them to lives of poverty and isolation. In Wrongs of Woman, Maria refers to her husband's machinations as an "infernal plot" (117). Both novels reveal women attempting to extricate themselves from these plots. Although Wollstonecraft's characters make significant progress toward righting the wrongs they commit

against their own sex, they do so behind prison walls as social outcasts. Because the infernal plot pits women against each other in a fight for survival, they remain impeded by self-interest. Ruth's Jemima achieves a heightened awareness of the world around her and dares to challenge the conventions of her day, both in her reactions to her father and in her sympathy toward, and friendship with, Ruth. By rebelling and stepping outside of the traditional boundaries of society, Jemima risks being alienated by her society and marginalized by the reader. But, like Gaskell, Jemima "preferred paying that price to observing the obligatory 'duty of silence' expected of respectable Victorian women on the subject of unrespectable Victorian women" (Logan 40). Jemima, a young woman raised in an upper middle-class household steeped in restrictive Victorian social conventions, truly breaks this duty of silence. Even more significantly, Jemima envisions a bright future for Ruth as an accepted and productive member of society rather than an outcast. Although the plot of this novel ultimately demands more punishment for the marked woman before she can find redemption on earth, Jemima challenges conventions by imagining an alternate plot for Ruth.

As Wollstonecraft indicates in her novel, this plot against women extends beyond social and economic hardships. Wollstonecraft reveals the way in which God, with society's permission, of course, functions as an agent of this "infernal plot." When discussing the deplorable state of marriage, Maria sarcastically reminds us that "a husband and wife were, as God knows, just as one" (105). Since marriage is a social institution, it is inextricably linked with the moral prejudices of the day. While Maria is necessarily a poor reader of the marriage contract, unable to see its correlation to the infernal plot, society is equally unwilling to envision an acceptable alternative to the heterosexual marriage plot. In Ruth, society uses religion as the platform from which they exclude Ruth: it judges her moral character according to Christian doctrine, yet it does not allow her to achieve the redemption these doctrines guarantee. Rather, it continues to set its own standards by which she can be punished or redeemed. Ironically, only when Ruth risks her own life to save others during a cholera epidemic does society grant her forgiveness. In both novels, plots from which these characters attempt to extricate themselves are social and moral. Indeed, "morality" is often used as a means of

controlling the powerless. Wollstonecraft and Gaskell valorize a bond between women, stigmatized or otherwise, as the best means by which women can re-tell their own stories and thereby challenge and subvert the plots that hitherto have consumed their lives.

These plots, however, extend far beyond the novels' characters into the authors' lives. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that nineteenth-century women writers were "[l]ocked into structures created by and for men" and thus "felt that they had things to hide" (74-75). While it seems that women writers wrote along traditionally established plot-lines, re-reading their texts with an increased understanding of women's issues can reveal undercurrents and sub-plots barely under the cover of an apparently orthodox plot. Elaine Showalter opines that feminist criticism has allowed us to "see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 75). The works of Wollstonecraft and Gaskell contain such plots, visible to careful readers, as these writers use and then move beyond

established structures in search of their own voice and literary tradition.

What Wollstonecraft and Gaskell ultimately offer us is a revision of sorority, in particular with the "fallen woman." In the Romantic novel self-interest necessary for survival continually impedes the relationship between Maria and Jemima, whereas in the Victorian text the friendship between Ruth and Jemima is based upon mutual esteem for each other's innate qualities. When her friend dies, Jemima lives on as a mother and active member of society who will tell Ruth's story with compassion.

Wollstonecraft's The Wrongs of Woman

> *"Yes, Jemima, look at me--observe me closely, and read my very soul; you merit a better fate;" she held out her hand with a firm gesture of assurance; "and I will procure it for you, as a testimony of my esteem, as well as of my gratitude." --Maria to Jemima in Wrongs of Woman (120).*

In 1797, six years after the publication of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, author Mary Wollstonecraft died in childbirth, leaving behind an unfinished text entitled Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman. In 1798, Wollstonecraft's husband, philosopher and writer William Godwin, published the revised and unrevised portions of her manuscript, along with several unfinished conclusions, in the first two volumes of his edition of Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman.[3] Wollstonecraft writes that her aim in Wrongs of Woman is to "show the wrongs of different classes of women, equally oppressive, though from the difference of education, necessarily various" (84). Although Wrongs of Woman has been called "propaganda" (Tompkins 315), the novel is actually a serious and sobering plea for social change. By the eighteenth century, a wife's legal position

was well defined. Sir William Blackstone, in his book Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books, wrote that "By marriage [. . .] the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (qtd. in Hill 196).[4] Marriage laws such as this were written primarily to define the property rights that a woman was to surrender upon marriage (Hill 197). The concerns of women are central in Wrongs of Woman and Wollstonecraft's ultimate progress resides in her representation of injustice to women. Throughout Wrongs of Woman Wollstonecraft demonstrates the patriarchy's gratuitous and even inhumane abuse of its power. In the novel, whereas men exercise their power over women capriciously, women are forced to act against each other in order to survive. Claudia Johnson opines that Wollstonecraft's unfinished work Wrongs of Woman is an "unprecedented" attempt to "establish a collective sense of identity inclusive of all women" (Equivocal Beings 66). Wollstonecraft deftly moves between socio-economic class divisions to articulate conflicts facing all women, thereby establishing an essential connection between women previously unexplored.

In Wrongs of Woman, Wollstonecraft presents us with multiple stories, both written and verbal, within her text. By considering as many aspects of woman wronged as she can into her novel, Wollstonecraft offers evidence to build up a strong case. In the plot, which turns on Maria and Jemima, "every minor female character is a case study of oppression" (Myers 115). The author, via Maria and other females in the story, exposes and challenges the social codes and laws that imprison women. On trial besides Darnford are Maria's actions and the social and legal codes that truly establish and perpetuate the wrongs of woman. Interspersed with various women's stories and Maria's plot to escape from prison, Wollstonecraft plants the seeds for awakened sympathy between women and a more equitable legal code. Maria pushes the limits of a legal system that defines women as property, and although she does not always adhere to her own standards, the author presents us with a vision of valorized sorority and a new system of justice. Wollstonecraft legitimizes women's emotions, urging women to cultivate a balance between emotion and reason. Ultimately, Wrongs of Woman leaves us with a new definition of women's character for future generations.

Wrongs of Woman opens in medias res, with Maria imprisoned by her own husband. Wollstonecraft purposefully selects a prison scene for the opening of this novel, as "the patriarchy is one large holding tank for women--a madhouse from which none escape unscathed" (Hoeveler 5). Maria's jailer is a woman of the lower class who has suffered greatly in her life. At first, Jemima, like many women, has become numb to "injustice"(88). Jemima is a "suspicious female" who first views her prisoner with a mixture of "interest and suspicion" (91). First of all, she is unsure if Maria's husband's claims of her madness are legitimate. Furthermore, as we soon learn, a large part of Jemima's suffering has been at the hands of other women. Jemima, as Wollstonecraft reveals, has an economic interest in identifying with her patriarchal aggressors rather than with the victim. Throughout the novel, relationships between women are marked by suspicion and frequently outright cruelty. In this sense, the prison in Wrongs of Woman is a microcosm of the outside world in which women imprison and abuse members of their own sex every day. Hence, the "external man-made imprisonment becomes internal and woman-made" (Todd 430). While women do not make the prisons, women such as Jemima enforce the rules in order to

secure their own best interests. Whereas this novel illustrates the "material, corporeal character of women's confinement," it is even more concerned with "representing how women's minds are fettered" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 61). Ironically, Maria needs to obtain the trust of her jailer in order to escape.

As a tentative friendship forms between the two women, they begin to share stories. The clarity of the narrative increases as the characters begin to confide in each other. Prior to this point, the prose seems almost incoherent, reflecting the disoriented state of the traumatized protagonist. Jemima tells stories of women who awake "sympathetic sorrow in Maria's bosom" (99). The stories she tells at this point, however, are of other women. Jemima, willing as she is to listen to Maria's story, would "sit, every moment she could steal from observation, listening to the tale which Maria was eager to relate" (88). Eventually her "cloud of suspicion clear[s]" because she feels "for once in her life treated like a fellow-creature" (91). Later, Jemima "voluntarily beg[ins] an account of herself" (106). An exchange begins to take place, and from this, a pattern encouraged by the patriarchy emerges: in order to ensure their personal survival, women oppress other women.

Within a society dominated by laws upholding the rights of the patriarchy, women wrong each other to protect themselves. Furthermore, this pattern also isolates women by separating them from each other. In a prison, ironically, women begin to free themselves of the suspicions they have harbored against their own sex.

While relating her story, Jemima tells us that when she was forced out of her home she had to resort to stealing in order to survive. Jemima makes no apologies for her behavior; rather, she "justifie[s] [her] conduct" because she "hated mankind" (118). To Jemima, society is at fault for not providing her with the means of "returning to the respectable part of society" (114). Caught stealing, Jemima was "taken and tried and condemned to six months' imprisonment" (118). When Jemima "is moved to tell her story," she "speaks out of a long tradition of similar narratives" (Jones 203) and it becomes clear that Jemima's story is that of many other women. But unlike other women, "Wollstonecraft's prostitute refuses to play the abject penitent" (Jones 215). Although Jemima has already been tried and condemned by society, her resistance to penitence allows Maria, Darnford, and readers the opportunity to reevaluate her case. Jemima represents the multitudes of

women that society has already condemned and ostracized without bothering to understand the deeper, underlying causes. Through Jemima's individual text we come to understand the problems afflicting numerous women.

Wrongs of Woman "raises textuality to a thematic prominence" (Rajan 223). Texts and the act of reading are tools for exposing and re-defining the legal codes that trap women. However, breaking from the past is difficult because women have been forced to establish habits for survival in an abusive and exploitive system which impede effective communication with others. The strategies for survival that Maria and Jemima form early as a result of education greatly influence their actions. Additionally, both women have developed distinct styles of reading and interpreting others that actually limit their own development and preclude their establishing stable emotional connections. While women slowly become better readers of each other's texts, the laws of society remain closed to alternative readings. To truly overcome the wrongs of woman, and just as significantly, to avoid the "infernal plot" (117), women must first understand their own histories and become critical self-readers.

Maria's and Jemima's respective ways of reading the world are well-established by the time they meet. The difference between their responses to injustice reveals that women must be aware of plots in order to avoid them. Jemima, like many women, has become numb to injustice and actually works as the agent of the patriarchy that imprisons women like Maria. When contemplating the "unexpected blow" of her husband's cruelty, Maria "could not have imagined that, in all the fermentation of civilized depravity, a similar plot could have entered a human mind" (8). To Maria, this situation is unfathomable, yet this type of imprisonment was far from anomalous: "the use of the private madhouse by fathers and husbands to incarcerate rebellious or disobedient daughters and wives was widespread in the eighteenth century" (Mellor 414).

In contrast, Jemima's awareness of society's cruelty grants her a significant advantage: she is able to recognize and therefore avoid these "plots." The combination of a "dear-bought knowledge of the world" (15) and a brief intellectual education causes Jemima to develop critical reading habits. Unlike Maria, she has learned to operate within the "infernal plot" (117) and even use it to her advantage. Her position provides her with a steady

income and it affords her a certain amount of power. By becoming the hand that holds the key to the prison door, Jemima attains a degree of control over other women. Jemima becomes an advantageous reader. She is no longer surprised at the exercise of injustice; she has been a victim of, and a participant in, this system of oppression since birth. Indeed, Jemima endeavors to profit in whatever way she can. It might seem illogical for a woman to experience any freedom when selling her body, but Jemima values her "selfish independence" (15) and as a "self-sufficient prostitute [she] experiences an unorthodox, if momentary, freedom" (Poovey 118). Jemima, although knowing she lives as a "slave" (40), at least struggles to do so on her own terms. Rather than attempting to escape the limitations that society places upon women, Jemima finds ways to operate within them.

The infernal plot is so woven into the social and moral fabric of society that women have come to internalize the hostility of the aggressor and then blame and hate themselves. As a result, the effects of the wrongs of women against other women are so deeply rooted in society that we, like Jemima, "wonder not that [she] became a wolf" (117). Jemima tells us that she came home with a tradesman

only to discover his pregnant mistress. Instead of acting compassionately, Jemima urges the tradesman to force the woman out of doors in order to secure her own position in his house. Later, when she sees the woman's corpse, she "wonder[s] how [she] could be such a monster" (117). Jemima does not commit gratuitously cruel acts against other women; rather, she reacts to the limitations imposed on her by patriarchal abuse. For Maria and Jemima, then, their newly formed "attachment" indicates "a turn toward solidarity and affective community with other women, a route hitherto blocked" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 66) by competition and cruelty. Later in her memoirs, Maria ponders, "Is it then surprising, that so many forlorn women, with human passions and feelings, take refuge in infamy?" (141). Her observation demonstrates her increased understanding and sympathy of "the oppressed state of women" (120). After hearing Jemima's narrative, Maria's "thoughts take a wider range" (120). She not only understands why marked women are driven to make certain decisions, but she also now acknowledges that these "forlorn" women are emotional beings. She sees them as humans, as "fellow-creature[s]" rather than objects of contempt. The women's texts (verbal or written) explain

their motives behind crimes committed against their own sex, and now that these motives are exposed, wounds can begin to heal.

Women cross social class divisions when they exchange stories. The very creation of a bond that extends between class lines challenges traditional class system divisions, thereby providing women with an understanding they have not had. Early in the novel, Jemima asks, "Who ever risked anything for me? Who ever acknowledged me to be a fellow creature?" (119). By the end of this novel, the beginning of a new sorority that "defies orthodoxies" (Jones 215) is envisioned wherein women draw upon each other for strength and companionship: "Jemima and Maria, the working-class prostitute and the middle-class consumer of her narrative, offer each other mutual, rather than one-sided redemption" (Jones 212). Through the sharing of stories, a new sympathy develops between women. The barriers of hostility and competition that women have had to build up against other women in order to survive in an unjust society begin to break down as these women realize they are all victims in a world where patriarchal social and legal structures deny them rights and a voice.

A great part of Maria's memoirs concerns her problematic marriage to Mr. Venables. Maria's uncle sells her into marriage for five thousand pounds. In this sense, Maria is prostituted like Jemima. Moreover, Maria's marriage is far from pleasant. In her memoirs, Maria documents in great detail her growing disrespect for her husband because of his disregard for her emotions and his unfaithfulness. According to social codes, Maria is "bound to respect and esteem" her husband, but she sarcastically adds, "as if respect and esteem depended upon an arbitrary will of our own" (149). Women's needs within and out of marriage are belittled and neglected within a society that prescribes moral imperatives but ignores the significance of emotions.

Because women have no rights under the law, and marriage is, in effect, a legal contract designed for the convenience of men, Maria takes it upon herself to define what a truly virtuous marriage should be--one marked by mutual respect and attraction. In Maria's new conception of virtue and marriage, "the 'conventionally' good woman who supports a marriage without love is deficient" (Jordan 232). Maria takes this concept a step further to conclude that the tie of marriage is not legally binding without

mutual love or respect. Maria demonstrates her resolve by confronting her husband when he attempts to prostitute her to his friend. Maria "call[s] on" Mr. S___ (and readers) "to witness that as solemnly as [she] took [Mr. Venables'] name, [she] now abjure[s] it" (152). Because her marriage does not meet the terms she establishes, Maria refuses to "renew" what she now refers to as a "lease of servitude" (156). Maria's "duty to herself, her right to self-determination, has obvious priority over her immoral marriage" (Maurer 113). Essentially, Maria gives herself the right to dissolve the marriage contract because to remain in such a marriage is, to her, far more immoral than to leave it.

Maria, redefining the terms not only of the marriage contract but also of relationships outside of marriage, says that "we cannot, without depraving our minds, endeavor to please a lover or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us" (145). In her redefinition of marriage, Maria stresses the validation of emotions and equality. Women who fail to insist on these terms actually harm themselves. Maria takes it upon herself to decide whom she calls husband. She decides that Henry Darnford measures up to her standards, although subsequent hints prove that she is

mistaken.[5] While still in prison, Maria "receive[s]" Darnford as "her husband" (173) and, in writing, she refers to him by the "sacred name of husband" (174). To her, the emotions that bring them together are more binding than the laws that tied her to Mr. Venables. Ironically, her rebellious affair with Darnford leaves her quite vulnerable from a legal standpoint whereas her husband's infidelities leave him unscathed.

Maria's vision of what constitutes a virtuous marriage differs greatly from the judge's definition during Darnford's trial. In his comments about marriage, the judge asks, "What virtuous woman [thinks] of her feelings?" (181). Indeed, this question is ironic given the corrupt definition of virtue to which society would have women adhere. Maria and Wollstonecraft elevate the emotional, asserting that a truly virtuous marriage is based on the need for equality and reciprocity of emotion. In Wrongs of Woman, the belief that "women's love for their husbands should be merely a duty is attacked as an immoral notion" (Jordan 232). While the law serves to protect the husband's rights in marriage, Maria's testimony illustrates that the ties that connect us to others must be more than legal, they must be emotional as well.

One impediment that has prohibited women from reaching a state of equality with men is women's lack of financial rights. Not only education but also economic independence will enable women to rise. Of course, in order to achieve economic independence, women must be employed, and throughout this novel women deplore the lack of job opportunities. Because of her circumstances, Jemima is "denied the chance of obtaining a footing for [her]self in society" (110). Like Jemima, many women cast out from respectable society resort to prostitution in order to survive. Society, failing to provide women with the means to earn their own living, should not deny responsibility for what they become. Without a chance at economic independence, outcast women will remain alienated and have no means to extricate themselves from a vicious cycle.

The women's escape is just one small step toward achieving true liberation. Jemima, quite aware of the importance of money, at first will help Maria only insofar as doing so will not result in "the loss of her place" (88). Using Jemima's exemplary story, Wollstonecraft asserts that women desire and need economic independence. For Jemima, a woman already condemned by society, the claim that "every person willing to work may find employment" is

a "fallacy" with "respect to women" (115). Throughout Jemima's narrative, her inability to earn money exacerbates her condition. After leaving the asylum, Maria and Jemima remain together, the latter being particular about the terms of their relationship: "Jemima insist[ed] on being considered as her housekeeper and to receive the customary stipend" (126). In response to the possible criticism that Maria is supporting the class structure of her culture, we note that Jemima's insistence on retaining her position as servant reflects her ability to make her own career choices as well as earn a living without resorting to prostitution. Despite the possibility that this arrangement only reinforces the status quo, a positive aspect of the women's relationship is a new sorority: "Though presented as mutually beneficial, the relationship obviously reinforces existing modes of class stratification. But at least it continues, where Maria's relationship with Darnford does not" (Nyquist 85). An important point to consider is, of course, why Jemima insists on these terms. Within this arrangement, Jemima does not entirely sacrifice her own interests; she continues to look out for herself and "maintains her independence by insisting on a properly financial rather than merely a sentimental contract" (Jones

216). This independence, however, is illusory as Jemima writes herself directly back into her previous role rather than attempting to truly change her position. To Jemima, purely emotional connections remain unreliable. As Janet Todd points out, in Maria and Jemima "we have the introduction of two friends but not the friendship" (301). Although the continuation of the women's relationship is a positive element in an otherwise dark story, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that there is still a long way to go before women like Jemima can achieve any sort of "surer ground" (16) in a society that so decidedly contrives against them.

The law not only fails to protect a woman within marriage but also persecutes her when she challenges her husband's authority. When the pregnant Maria attempts to escape from her husband, she needs to secure temporary lodging, no easy task, as she is now "hunted out like a felon" (160). Because the law still considers Mr. Venables to be Maria's husband, her leaving him constitutes a criminal act. One landlady from whom she rents agrees to conceal her temporarily. This landlady, who has accepted her role in society, tells Maria, "when a woman was once married, she must bear everything" (158). In order to persuade the landlady to assist her, Maria "excited her

sympathy" by telling her "the truth" (163). The woman then reciprocates Maria's gesture by relating "how she had been used in the world" (164). Her husband "signed an execution on [her] very goods, bought with the money [she] worked so hard to get" (164). After exchanging stories, Maria "prevails upon [the] landlady" to obtain lodging for her. Again, empathy between oppressed women occurs only when women risk sharing their stories.

The story that the landlady relates functions as more than a tale of an oppressed woman. It is no accident that Wollstonecraft "endeavour[s] by all means to get all the wrongs of woman into one story" (Tompkins 315). These women's stories are corroborating evidence. The landlady testifies that "women have always the worst of it, when law is to decide" (165). By including these examples of how women cannot legally own anything or have legal access to money, Wollstonecraft provides further ammunition for Maria's case. Whereas the judge at Darnford's trial asserts that the current social and legal codes "might bear hard on a few, very few individuals" (181), we are witnesses to the contrary testimonies of multiple women. From a moral point of view, however, numbers should not

matter. If a single woman suffers such wrongs while the law actually supports her abuser, the law is immoral.

Not only fallen and lower class women suffer from economic problems. The situation between Maria and her husband attests that women, regardless of social class, lack legal control of financial resources. In Maria's case, the money she inherits or earns "must all pass through [her husband's] hand" because "over their mutual fortune she has no power" (145). Because married women have no control over money, marriage is contractually unequal. A woman cannot "lawfully" retrieve money, whether it "falls to her by chance" or is "earn[ed] from her own exertions" from her husband, regardless of how he chooses to spend it (149). Mr. Venables constantly extorts from Maria the money she obtains from her uncle, and then spends it on prostitutes or gambling. Having access to money is necessary for survival, and women have restricted means to earn an income due to the "partial laws of society" (146) that keep the money in the hands of men.

In Maria's society, sons, not daughters, are designated as family heirs. In her own family, Maria's own brother was "representative of [her] father" and acted "like an heir apparent" (124). Daughters, unable to share

in such a system, are "always essentially disinherited" (Hoeveler 8). Even when Maria's uncle leaves money for her in his will, he must go to great lengths to keep the money out of her husband's hands. The laws "enacted by men" only emphasize "the dependent state of women" (146). But, as Wrongs of Woman reveals, money is not the only legacy that men can leave their children. Additionally, men are not the only ones who stand to receive an inheritance. Wollstonecraft articulates (and is herself a part of) a new legacy specific to women.

Because women are excluded from the traditional concept of inheritance, Wollstonecraft creates an entirely new matrilineal inheritance. Throughout her writings, Wollstonecraft "advocates an educated and rational motherhood as the way to acknowledge and simultaneously to challenge the limitations her society placed upon women" (Maurer 41). At first, Maria "mourns that she has given birth to a daughter" because "by doing so, she is all too aware that she has perpetuated the cycle of misery and abuse" (Hoeveler 5). Certainly, it appears that "the ills to which the woman is heir" (150) have constituted the only legacy passed from mother to daughter. Jemima is the embodiment of this legacy of misfortunes, passed down from

one generation to the next: her father seduced her mother, and when her mother "estranged him from her so completely," Jemima's father "began to hate [her]" even before her birth (107). When Jemima becomes pregnant as a result of her master's repeated sexual assaults, she aborts her own child. Later, Maria implores Jemima to seek knowledge of her daughter, saying, "assist me to snatch her from destruction! [. . .] Let me but give her an education [. . .] and I will teach her to consider you as her second mother" (12). Maria asks Jemima to be partner with her in saving her daughter. And, even more than asking her to serve as a surrogate mother, Maria offers Jemima a chance to change her own history, to re-write her legacy.

Upon returning to her room after listening to Jemima's story, Maria "think[s] of Jemima's peculiar fate and her own" and is "led to consider the oppressed state of women" (120). This consideration leads Maria to write her memoirs for her daughter, who was cruelly taken from her. Through the act of writing this text, Maria enacts Wollstonecraft's concept of inheritance. Jemima's story becomes the inspiration for Maria's memoirs, which she writes to "instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid" (90). Observing

that Jemima's humanity has "rather been benumbed than killed" (120), Maria implores her to search for news of her daughter. Maria's new "sympathy with Jemima," combined with her own need to know the fate of her child, causes her to reach out to Jemima with "irresistible warmth" (120). Motherhood, a state unique to women, serves as a bond. Jemima, who waits to advance a friendship with Maria until she is on "surer ground" (91), instantly sympathizes with Maria when she learns that Maria's baby daughter "had been torn from her." Immediately, Jemima's reserve breaks down, as Maria's plight "awoke" emotions "in a bosom long estranged from feminine emotions," and Jemima "determined to alleviate all in her power [. . .] the sufferings of a wretched mother" (88). Motherhood and "feminine emotions" are stories that women have in common; by sharing their experiences, women break down the barriers they have built up against each other, thereby creating a new female sorority that their daughters may inherit.

Motherhood becomes the means to pass down this new inheritance of women's education to future generations. In Wrongs of Woman, motherhood is a revolutionary occupation: as we see again and again, a woman's mother can either heal or harm her daughter. Jemima attributes the "greater part

of [her] misery to the misfortune of having been thrown in to the world without the grand support of life--a mother's affection" (110). Jemima's legacy has been nothing but pain and alienation. Motherhood takes on an enhanced significance; it becomes a way for women to prepare their daughters for the challenges they will face and "warn them by [their] example" of the legal and social snares to which they could fall victim (110). Women also come to know themselves better through the act of sharing their texts: Maria "learns through her position as a mother to read herself" (Maurer 37). Consequently, daughters will learn from the trials and errors of their mothers.

Maria calls women the "out-laws of the world" (146). Indeed, the same law guarding patrilineal inheritance, often unfairly, denies women a similar birthright. Within the novel, this new inheritance, via motherhood, is outside of any existing laws. It exists only in the texts that women allow themselves to share. If women affirm the precedent of mutual understanding and sympathy established between Maria and Jemima, then this legacy will continue. Maria's memoir represents the beginnings of this new birthright. Furthermore, as this mother/daughter mentor relationship is not solely biological but rather textual,

all women can be a part of a new inheritance in which women reach out to each other in kindness rather than cruelty.

Early on Maria asks what might be considered a rhetorical question: "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?" (88). To her, at the time, it certainly is. After our exposure to the unfolding friendship between Maria and Jemima and the experiences of other women, we may get the impression that women have become each other's jailers. Wollstonecraft argues that women have the ability (and responsibility) to enable other women to escape their prisons rather than themselves become agents of the established system. Additionally, Wollstonecraft suggests that, although born into a society where laws fail to represent them and social codes fail to protect them, women need not live enslaved. A new sorority becomes the "most effective way to overturn [patriarchal] order," as for her daughter's sake a woman "can analyze and thus refine the sensibility that damaged her own life" (Maurer 46). With a mother's appreciation and concern for other women's texts, and a daughter's careful attention, women can rise above the mistakes of their predecessors.

Maria, however, still struggles with the faults of society and with her own mistakes. After Maria escapes

from her prison, Mr. Venables, not wanting to lose the income his wife brings him, calls Darnford to trial for seducing his wife. Maria takes "the task of conducting Darnford's defence upon herself" (178). Although Darnford is on the stand for the seduction of Maria and adultery, the "narrator represents Maria as the one on trial" (Jordan 224). Maria is present in court only via the text; her physical presence would not have been permitted. Furthermore, a letter "such as Maria writes might have remained unopened to this day"; thus, "Maria's defense in relation to the law and legal practice in her day, is a silent and fantastic (im)possibility" (Jordan 224). Mirroring the condition of women in society, "Maria places herself outside the legal system rather than within it" (Temple 74). Indeed, within the legal system she has no power. Within this novel and through her own text, Maria appropriates the legal space traditionally reserved for men. Wollstonecraft gives Maria, and by implication all other women, both a voice and a hearing.

Public hearings, however, were largely denied women at this time. In addition to not being physically present in court, Maria would not have been able to call witnesses on her behalf. Likening this trial to a criminal conversation

case, Elaine Jordan observes that "Prosecution witnesses in crim. con. actions would be called by the husband--often servants, economically dependent on him, and obviously not those most loyal to the lady" (224). However, Wollstonecraft calls multiple witnesses on Maria's behalf throughout the text, which thereby becomes a way to retry gender-based culpability. We, as readers, also serve as witnesses of the wrongs of and against women as this case unfolds. Maria herself indicates that witnesses "are not wanting to establish these facts" (179). Thus, Maria's testimony in court does not stand alone: a pattern of the wrongs of woman has already been established.

Maria, "convinced that the subterfuges of the law [are] disgraceful," writes a paper to be read in court presenting and defending her case (178). She instructs Darnford's counsel to "plead guilty to the charge of adultery" (178), but not of seduction. Offering no apologies for her behavior, Maria asserts that she is "a justified adultress, one who has not been seduced" (Jordan 232). Maria then presents her case against her husband, the truth of which is "an insult upon humanity" (179). She testifies about her husband's abusive behavior, "exposes the sexual double standard" (Maurer 47), then "claim[s] a

divorce" (181). Readers who have witnessed the atrocities against women, both within Maria's marriage and in other relationships, now become the jury in a case where everyone is on trial: Maria, Darnford, society, and the law itself.

In her letter, Maria "appeal[s] to the justice and humanity of the jury" (181). She desires that her whole story be heard in a public forum, but "rational as they may be, Maria's 'feelings' can find no place in a legal system that classifies a wife as her husband's property" (Maurer 47). While we "respect the sanity of her physical and moral alienation, the judge finds just the opposite: that Maria does not appear to be 'a person of sane mind'" (qtd. in Johnson, Equivocal Beings 64). Throughout the text, Maria presents strong, tangible evidence of her husband's abuse, but the judge, "knowing women to be synonymous with feeling [. . .] hear[s] none of her reasoning, only an appeal to feeling" (Todd 434). To the judge, representing the verdict of a society not willing to accept a woman as a human being, a "woman's refusal of her husband's conjugal rights on the grounds that her erotic feelings are equally legitimate smacks to him of insurrectionary [. . .] 'new fangled notions' inimical to the 'good old rules of conduct'" (qtd. in Johnson, Equivocal Beings 64). To him,

it is a "fallacy" to let women "plead their feelings" (181). Yet Maria adamantly asserts that a woman's emotional plea is as valid as any other.

Although the court disregards Maria's testimony and the verdict goes against her, some progress is made. Maria's "seemingly ineffective speech can be reread as a feminized juridical text that interrupts and disrupts official juridical language" (Temple 75). Within this novel, Maria's text is the court scene. Temporarily, at least, Maria occupies that legal space that has excluded her sex for so long. And, even though Maria's text is disregarded in court both in the novel and in Wollstonecraft's time, it is included and made public in Wrongs of Woman.

Texts and reading become instruments in exposing and re-defining the social and legal codes that trap women. The very essence of women's relationships to others' stories changes: "the female reader's passive relationship to reading--a self-destructive escape into imagination--is radically transformed" (Maurer 51). The exchange of stories and the act of reading break down barriers between women, advocate education, and provide a way for women to enter

the legal system. Hence, literacy becomes an agent of reform for subsequent generations of women.

Maria, Jemima, and numerous other women from various social classes offer their testimonies. Readers, from Wollstonecraft's time to our own, become a sort of jury in the case of women's rights and wrongs. In her letter, Maria's "private problems are finally transformed into public ones" (Temple 72), and she urges the jury to re-examine the "good old rules of conduct" (181). Wollstonecraft makes it clear in this text that the existing social and legal codes have a much more widespread effect than many would like to believe. By the time we reach the trial scene, we have heard enough evidence to convict Mr. Venables. Furthermore, while the judge remarks that these social codes "bear hard on a few, a very few, individuals," we have heard evidence to the contrary (181). We, like Jemima and Maria, interact with the women who present their stories. Our experience with this text has made us, like Jemima, "the witness of many enormities" (119). And it depends upon us, as the witnesses, and ultimately as the jury in the cases presented in Wrongs of Woman, to put Maria's new vision of justice into action.

Despite her ideas, Maria does not always live up to her own standards. However, where the novel may appear to fail is actually one of its greatest strengths. Maria's romantic perceptions of Henry Darnford prove to be naïve and she is blinded by emotion. In several of the projected endings, Wollstonecraft hints at Darnford's infidelity. As Johnson so aptly states, the "truth which Wollstonecraft's stunning novel recommends is that Maria's consciousness is chained most effectively by the ideology of heterosexual love itself" (Equivocal Beings 61). Perhaps Maria's faults can be traced back to her own childhood, where she herself lacked mother's careful instruction. It is in hopes of remedying Maria's, and multitudes of other women's, naivete that Wollstonecraft composes this novel.

The narrator drops enough hints for readers to realize that Darnford may not be any better than the other men in her life. Jordan suggests that "Maria's rhapsodic flights of 'false' sensibility are generally parodic, and invite a suspicious reading of both her lover Darnford, and of her feelings about him" (222). Thus Maria's inability to see Darnford's faults derives from the fact that she "is not only a prisoner to her marriage but also a prisoner to the delusoriness of the romantic love that yoked her to

Venables in marriage to begin with" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 61-62). Using Maria as an example, Wollstonecraft suggests that, although women's emotions are valid and should not be suppressed, there is a need to balance emotion with reason. If women fail to monitor their emotions, their sentiments can become liabilities: Maria is "more anxious not to deceive, than to guard against deception" (173). Although her honesty is seemingly a positive trait, this aspect of her nature becomes a weakness: while Maria becomes increasingly adept at reading the texts of other women, she fails to correctly read Darnford's character. The narrator asks, with regards to Maria and Darnford's relationship, "What chance had Maria of escaping" (165). Maria is still trapped in the same plot, the same story, from which large numbers of women cannot break free. Wrongs of Woman is "Wollstonecraft's attempt to emancipate a female character from the love story" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 48). Although Maria envisions a new plot for her daughter and other women, she remains, at the end of the completed portions of Wollstonecraft's text, unable to escape from the bonds of sentimentality and an overly romanticized vision of love. Ironically, it is Darnford who first receives and reads

Maria's memoirs, and then uses this information to seduce her. Once again, the heterosexual relationship disrupts communication between women.

Because Wollstonecraft did not complete this novel, we are left only with projected endings. One ending, considered by many as the "most optimistic of the novel's projected endings" (Jones 215), depicts Jemima, upon discovering Maria's child is still alive, rushing to Maria with the baby, saving her from suicide. In this conclusion, the two women and child set off together. Hence, the "emancipated [. . .] mutually respecting and rationally loving couple that Wollstonecraft spent her career imagining is, finally, female" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 69). The women's bond in this ending presents a new "kindred affection and community with which biological kinship has nothing to do" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 69). However, it is important to note that the female couple envisioned in the end is not necessarily a voluntary or purely sentimental arrangement. Maria does not end her relationship with Darnford voluntarily, nor does Jemima remain with Maria without benefits, financial and emotional, to herself. In a sense, becoming a second mother to Maria's child offers Jemima the chance to exculpate

herself from her past acts, to finally become the mother that she prevented herself from becoming earlier. Nonetheless, Maria's daughter gives both Maria and Jemima something to live for, something beyond the traditional, and hitherto problematic, heterosexual relationship. A new sorority is envisioned, although not enacted, wherein women draw upon each other for mutual support and protection.

Wollstonecraft's accomplishments are remarkable and ground-breaking, regardless of the unfinished novel's "ending" hopeful or otherwise. Instead of acting as each other's oppressors, women become for a moment the hands to help each other with compassion and "a firm gesture of assurance" (120). Since society's laws do not protect women, women must take it upon themselves to assist each other. Wollstonecraft creates an alternative system of justice outside masculinist law. In this system, women's feelings are valuable and valid. As we can see from the court scene, women's texts are also outside the law, but they become accessible to us in Wrongs of Woman. Although Maria's immediate audience disregards her words, our reading them not only validates but also remarks their higher law. Wollstonecraft creates an unsympathetic court to contrast with Maria's text, which, within the larger

text Wrongs of Woman, leaves an interpretive legacy to readers who are worthy of hearing the case. After presenting us with a series of patriarchal atrocities, Wollstonecraft expects readers to sympathize with the women in the novel. Therefore when the judge dismisses Maria's testimony, we rule his words out of order. Only women and men who carefully listen to their own stories, Wollstonecraft suggests, have the right to hear, and try, the wrongs of women.

As evidenced by Darnford's trial, a new court is needed where women's voices and emotions will be taken seriously, because as it stands for Maria (and for Wollstonecraft), "the laws of [a woman's] country - if women have a country - afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor unless she have the plea of bodily fear" (149). This text both constitutes and validates a new plea: a woman's emotional appeal. Until a new version of justice is realized, women must be empowered to procure "a better fate" for themselves. By reading each others "very soul[s]" Maria begins to take on the responsibility that all women should: of helping each other to secure a better future than has hitherto been afforded them. This new relationship between women is reciprocal: Jemima frees Maria from

prison, but it also "depends upon [Maria] to reconcile [Jemima] with the human race" (174). Maria asserts that legal ties may not matter as much as emotional ones. Furthermore, "by teaching her daughter, and by extension all female readers, actively to consider rather than passively absorb, the text of her own life" Maria "endow[s]" daughters with "a 'grand principle of action' that will empower her to experience the pleasures of sensibility without falling prey to them" (Maurer 50). Readers become heirs of these texts, as well. By writing this novel, Wollstonecraft endows readers, along with daughters, with the new inheritance necessary to enact her vision.

The Wollstonecraft / Gaskell Connection

Fifty-five years following the publication of Wrongs of Woman Gaskell published Ruth. Many changes--social, political, and literary--occurring during this span affected the public's attitude toward women. Women's importance in the family structure rose to a virtually unattainable standard. The Victorians held out a specific ideal of womanhood toward which all women were to strive. This ideal, however, was not one that many women were realistically able to achieve. In her studies of Victorian domestic life, Martha Vicinus observes:

> Throughout the Victorian period the perfect lady as an ideal of femininity was tenacious and all pervasive, in spite of its distance from the objective situations of countless women. [. . .] The main difficulty with the perfect lady as a model of behaviour even in the middle classes (and it came to be accepted, in an altered form, in other classes) was the narrowness of the definition. Few women could afford to pursue the course laid out for them, either economically, socially, or psychologically. (x)

In Ruth, Gaskell uses Jemima, who should be the epitome of this ideal, as the vehicle through which she channels her most radical message: society should strive to be less ruth-less and more Jemima-like.

What influence did Wollstonecraft have on Victorian feminists? Due to Victorian attitudes regarding women and sexuality, radical reformers such as Wollstonecraft who lived infamous lifestyles were rarely mentioned in either society or literature. Barbara Caine discusses in depth the Victorian reaction to Wollstonecraft:

> The lack of discussion about Wollstonecraft by Victorian feminists does not mean that she was either unknown or unimportant to them. On the contrary, the very brevity of the few references to her which do exist suggest rather that she was so well-known that brief and even oblique references could bring her instantly to mind. (261)

Godwin's biography of Wollstonecraft played a large role in shaping the Victorian public's opinion of her. This biography included, among other items, references to her lover Imlay and their illegitimate child, and details from her emotional and sexual life.[6] Considering these factors,

the Victorians saw that "a connection with Wollstonecraft suggested only moral laxity" (Caine 262).

Trying to determine Victorian feminists' attitude toward Wollstonecraft is, essentially, an attempt to track similarities and changes in the feminist tradition. The problem with this investigation, as Caine indicates, is the general lack of a firm tradition within feminism: "feminist writers, activists and theorists have never had the kind of prestige or patronage which would make later generations seek connection with them as a way of enhancing their own status" (262). Given this observation and the Victorians' negative perception of Wollstonecraft's character, we can see why Gaskell and other Victorian feminists might hesitate to invoke the name of Mary Wollstonecraft. It was nearly a century after Wollstonecraft's death that her work was taken up again; Caine notes that the rehabilitation of Wollstonecraft began to occur in the 1890s.

While it is difficult to say with certainty the extent of Gaskell's exposure to Wollstonecraft's writings, several critics, including myself, see remarkable connections between the two authors that indicate that Gaskell was familiar with Wollstonecraft and her work. In a fascinating article, Mary Waters establishes a connection between

Wollstonecraft's writings and Gaskell's novel Wives and Daughters.[7] Waters argues that there is a "remarkable resemblance between the characterization of Mrs. Gibson and the passages from A Father's Legacy to His Daughters and Wollstonecraft's criticism of this conduct book" (15). Waters argues that in this one character, Gaskell "implicitly demonstrates her agreement with the tenets of the most radical feminist to date" (18).[8]

In writing Ruth, Gaskell draws upon traditional representations of marked women in literature, particularly in Romantic texts. In addition to reacting against the social conventions that held down women like Ruth, Gaskell also challenges the traditional representations of so-called "fallen women" and the plots they have been written into. Thus, marked women slowly come to realize that they have a character. Via Ruth, Gaskell is "taking on existing literary conventions and examining them for what they do and do not allow a woman writer to say about female experience, and for the ways in which they appropriate and manipulate women as aesthetic objects and subjects of literary plotting" (Schor 159). I believe that in Ruth Gaskell displays more than just agreement with

Wollstonecraft; rather, Gaskell demonstrates that her ideas are just as radical as the infamous feminist's.

The Struggle to a Greater Awareness: Jemima Bradshaw in Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth

Ruth, published in 1853, is Elizabeth Gaskell's second full-length work of fiction. Within its pages, Gaskell deals with one of Victorian society's most pressing social concerns, the stigmatized woman, which was not an uncommon topic in Victorian literature. Nevertheless, Bick observes that "Ruth differs significantly from the fallen women in the majority of nineteenth-century novels because she is not a spectral figure or secondary character--but the heroine"(18). The purpose of Ruth was "both to protest against the double standard of Victorian sexual morality and at the same time to plead for a more charitable, a truly more Christian, attitude towards the betrayed mother" (Sharps 146). Thus, while the focus of the novel is Ruth's progression from perdition to salvation, Gaskell also delves into a thorough exploration of the few people who facilitate Ruth's progress and the "labyrinths of social ethics"(Gaskell 98) they must consequently enter.

When Mr. Bellingham deserts Ruth in Wales, the minister Thurston Benson and his sister Faith come first to her aid. Laura Hapke draws attention to Gaskell's unique treatment of marked women: "In contrast to the outcast

women in novels by men, Ruth [...] is befriended by both a man and a woman [...] [F]rom the very first Gaskell emphasizes the need for Miss Benson to help rescue Ruth" (19). Early on, Gaskell stresses the importance of women as agents of social reform. Mr. and Miss Benson learn about Ruth's situation as they nurse her back to health. Moreover, they learn she now bears Mr. Bellingham's child. Taking pity on Ruth, they bring her back with them to Eccleston and pass her off as the widow Mrs. Denbigh, so that she may be placed in circumstances where she can "work out her self-redemption" (286). Thus, "From the time of her desertion to her death, Ruth's main source of spiritual guidance and support is the sympathetically drawn Thurston Benson" (Wheeler 152). While much attention has been paid to the Bensons' relationship with Ruth, the role that Jemima Bradshaw plays both in Ruth's development and the development of the novel itself remains largely unexplored.[9]

Whereas Thurston and Faith Benson function as the primary agents of Ruth's reentry into society, Jemima Bradshaw plays a key role in re-defining the Victorian stereotype of the "fallen woman." Gaskell designs a novel in which Ruth and Jemima, women who come from vastly different social environments, must undergo journeys of

growth leading them to greater awareness; for the former it is a heightened spiritual consciousness, for the latter a far more complex understanding of the major social issues of her day. Through Jemima, Gaskell challenges the conventional beliefs of society and presents a vision of friendship between stigmatized women that challenges established socio-economic barriers. Jemima and Ruth's friendship shows the potential for an equal, lasting bond: Jemima takes risks to stand by Ruth and puts the needs of her friend above her own, thus initiating a bond built upon mutual esteem, understanding and, most importantly, acceptance.

Jemima serves as the mediator not only between the society of Eccleston and Ruth, but also between readers and stereotypical ostracized woman. Through Jemima's innermost thoughts, Gaskell calls upon readers to question conventions; our imaginations, particularly toward the end of Ruth, see through Jemima's eyes and through Ruth herself to a Christ-like compassion that Gaskell would have society adopt. Yet Jemima, as well as Ruth, must rebel against the common opinions and conventions of their time in order to open our eyes. This novel "requires a reinterpretation of conventional beliefs" (McGavran 39) and it is by witnessing

Jemima's firsthand reaction to Ruth's situation, which challenges the conventional beliefs Jemima grew up with, that Gaskell effects this reinterpretation. Jemima's observations of Ruth's character defy ingrained Victorian middle-class attitudes and urge us to revise how we read women. Wheeler asserts that in Ruth, "Mrs. Gaskell makes a Fallen Woman the heroine of her novel and manipulates her readers into a sympathetic attitude towards her [. . .] Mrs. Gaskell expected her readers to respond to Ruth at more than one level" (161). The critic also insists on Ruth's spiritual salvation and awakened moral consciousness, noting that "the plot is designed to focus the reader's attention on the spiritual and moral development of the heroine throughout the novel"(150). However, if we focus only on Ruth's struggle toward redemption, we miss other critical components of what, in Gaskell's eyes, may facilitate social reform. For example, Logan observes that what "Ruth demands is a reinterpretation of fallen sexuality as well as of 'respectable sexuality'-which, like 'recuperated fallen woman,' also seems to be a contradiction in terms"(37). Gaskell sees social reform as involving changes in social attitudes, which Jemima personifies.

Society's attitudes toward stigmatized women are complex. Gaskell does not hesitate to indicate that a society so eager to condemn Ruth actually fails her in many regards. A thorough understanding of Ruth's struggle to attain a greater awareness is necessary to understand the way that her upbringing differs from Jemima's. Whereas Jemima has led a sheltered life under her father's strict moral instruction, Ruth is orphaned at a young age and left with little education and virtually no moral guidance. The circumstances of Ruth's early life and her unfamiliarity with social maxims clearly affected her choices, primarily her decision to leave Fordham with her seducer, Mr. Bellingham. While seamstresses are often depicted as morally lax, Logan opines that Ruth's ignorance made her a victim: "it was not any innate depravity among the seamstresses that caused Ruth's fall: rather it was her unchaperoned, unworldly state that made her easy prey for the opportunistic Bellingham" (36). Furthermore, Logan argues that "on the basis of Ruth's lack of sexual knowledge, she cannot be held accountable for her seduction; this is reinforced by the fact that her transgression, once she understands it, is one that she never repeats" (35). Thus, in Ruth, Gaskell shifts the

blame from the marked woman and holds as more reprehensible the man who fails to take moral and sexual responsibility for his actions (Logan 34). Society refuses to take responsibility for Ruth's ignorance, nor does it offer forgiveness or sympathy when she repents. To society, the fact that she's already a marked woman makes her unremarkable, and, as the Bradshaws of the world prove, Ruth's personal story has no impact on the judgment of her character. Truly, they don't even care to hear about her past unless it suits their purpose. Gaskell satirizes Mr. Bradshaw's bigoted attempts to protect "innocent" society's children as he only turns his attention to Ruth's past when he feels she may corrupt his own family. When he confronts Ruth after learning of her past, she attempts to defend herself, saying "I was so young" (277). Instead of taking pity on her, or inquiring into the circumstances of her youth that might have led her to her mistake, he determines that the ignorance of her youth makes her mistakes even more deplorable: "The more depraved, the more disgusting you" (277). Mr. Bradshaw's judgment of Ruth reveals a moral blindness affecting the upper classes: perhaps the Bradshaws of this world prefer to remain ignorant to the plights of others because, by maintaining a comfortable

distance from those they stigmatize, they can avoid accusations of complicity.

When in Wales with Mr. Bellingham Ruth begins to realize how she is caught in a plot: "Ruth's consciousness is emphatically awakened" and she "begins to realize the gravity of private actions that are open to public scrutiny" (Logan 36). But what Gaskell presents us with in Ruth is not merely a woman who fails, or falls short of society's expectations, but more a society that fails to guide a woman properly. Mrs. Mason, the surrogate mother to whom Ruth is apprenticed in Fordham, "does nothing to clarify that sense of guilt, preferring to assume the worst and dismiss Ruth from her establishment on the basis of appearance" (Logan 35). If Mrs. Mason had bothered to talk with Ruth about her situation, she could have prevented her from running off with Mr. Bellingham. When Mr. Bellingham departs Wales with his mother after recovering from his illness, he trusts that his mother will "let it be done handsomely" (77), even though he has the vague sense "that he was not behaving as he should do, to Ruth" (78). Because of the importance attached to surface appearance and Ruth's lower social status, her supposedly inconsequential feelings and future make her virtually

invisible to those who won't see any way but their own. Ruth's oppression is both sexist and classist. Tragically, once marked, women seem to have little recourse but to follow the plots society has already laid out for them, most often poverty and prostitution.

Indeed, it seems that society has already decided the fate of women such as Ruth, both within the novel and within Gaskell's society. According to one "infuriated reader" of Ruth, also a reviewer for the British Quarterly Review, "Society has decreed that women who have once left the straight paths of virtue shall wander all their days outcast, branded, apart" (qtd. in Bick 18). But, whereas Mr. Bradshaw feels that the "world has decided how such women are to be treated," Mr. Benson reasons that "every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption" (288). With the exception of the Bensons, Jemima is the only other character in the novel who does not rush to conclusions or judge each situation based on appearance--she pieces things together and tries to make a whole out of seemingly incoherent parts. Gaskell allows us into Jemima's thoughts. By birth the privileged child of a prosperous man, Jemima has been raised in a very different type of situation from Ruth's: "Close in age to

Ruth, [Jemima] contrasts with her as the young woman, brought up in a normal family and right principles, who equally has conflicts with social pressure and with impulses within herself" (Craik 74). She responds to Ruth in a way that opposes the convictions of her father, and Gaskell wants readers to note how Jemima reaches conclusions.

Jemima's sensitivity to others sharply contrasts with the stern precepts of her upbringing. Jemima's first interaction with Ruth, when she gains permission to attend Leonard's (Ruth's son) christening and tea afterwards, reveals her attempts at reading others. While the Bensons describe her as a "warm-hearted girl"(153), Mr. Benson calls attention to the rigidity of the Bradshaw household when he says, "But remember how strict Mr. Bradshaw has always been with his children" (153). Unlike Ruth, Jemima grows up in an environment that is well fortified with moral and social standards. Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw give Jemima guidelines for virtually every course of action she takes in life, including the amount of food she should eat when visiting the Benson household. All of her father's rules, however, have not hardened Jemima's heart. While at the christening, Jemima hears Mr. Benson talking about

Leonard: "This child, rebuked by the world and bidden to stand apart, Thou wilt not rebuke, but will suffer it to come to Thee and be blessed with Thine almighty blessing" (152). Later that same day at the Bensons, Jemima's inquiring nature shines through when she asks, "Why is this little darling to be rebuked? I do not think I remember the exact words, but he said something like that" (152). Immediately after posing this question, Jemima becomes aware of the discomfort it causes when she sees tears dripping down Ruth's cheek, and so "with a sudden consciousness that unwittingly she had touched on some painful chord, Jemima rushed into another subject" (153). Gaskell demonstrates Jemima's early (mis)readings of others while also indicating her careful consideration of their emotions.

Jemima, whose character increases in complexity, is not content to allow others to decide her feelings, or her future, for her. Her independent thinking, which her parents label as a stubborn streak, eventually leads her to question society's condemnation of Ruth. The first signs of Jemima's rebellious nature surface against the sanctions imposed on her by her father when she learns that a future marriage between her and Mr. Farquar has "been implied

between [Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Farquar] for some time" (183). Mr. Bradshaw expresses his hope that one day his daughter and Farquar will marry, provided that she "prove [herself] worthy of the excellent training" (182) that he has given her. Within the walls of her own home Jemima begins to chafe against the conventions, the infernal plot, of her time. That these two men have been writing her future in business terms, without her hand in the transaction, distresses her. Essentially, Jemima begins to understand that there is a plot for her life over which she has little control. At first Jemima remains quiet, which her father, "pleased by her silence" (182), mistakes for filial duty. When Jemima learns that her father, beginning to reinterpret the silence, has asked Ruth to seek the truth, she becomes angry, thinking it "repugnant" that her own father consulted with "a stranger [. . .] how to manage his daughter, so as to obtain the end he wished for" (197). Jemima is not so much angered by the idea of marrying Mr. Farquar as she is by her lack of control regarding the arrangements. Furthermore, Jemima is outraged that her behavior must be orchestrated to impress a suitor: her father wants her to "behave well, not because it is right [. . .] but to show off before Mr. Farquar" (185). Jemima,

now aware of the powerful social expectations that threaten to dictate her choices, resents that her personal feelings and opinions are inconsequential to the patriarchy.

As Wollstonecraft has done in Wrongs of Woman, Gaskell demonstrates that when women are forced to act as rivals, sympathy and compassion are signs of weakness. In her reaction against her father, Jemima behaves in a manner totally opposite her normal liveliness, thus alienating Mr. Farquar. Soon, Jemima perceives that "she had lost her place as the first object in Mr. Farquar's eyes" (202), and the attention he used to bestow upon her has been transferred to Ruth. After learning of Ruth's past, however, Jemima ceases to be jealous of Ruth. As much as Jemima sympathizes with Ruth and understands the circumstances that have influenced her decisions in life, Jemima realizes that these same circumstances mean that Ruth can no longer be a rival for Mr. Farquar's affections. Indeed, the revelation of Ruth's past quickly leads to a romantic reconciliation between Jemima and Mr. Farquar. Mr. Farquar, while he maintains an interest in Ruth and Leonard's well-being, is more relieved than empathetic; he demonstrates that his primary concern is maintaining his own reputation when he expresses his "thankfulness that he

had escaped a disagreeable position, and a painful notoriety" (304). Although Gaskell doesn't present Mr. Farquar in an especially unfavorable light, his "motives and reactions seem at odds with his supposed right thinking" when he "congratulates himself on a lucky escape" (Craik 76). Mr.Farquar's thoughts about Ruth reflect a society concerned with an individual's background and social circumstances only when it suits their purposes. Ironically, although Mr. Farquar initially sees Ruth as exactly "what a woman should be" (254), her past is an insurmountable barrier to her ever being an acceptable wife. Indeed, "Gaskell's doubling of the characters of Ruth and Jemima reveals that the outcome of a girl's courtship may depend more on her circumstances than her moral integrity" (Craik 46). These circumstances become tragically limiting when society will not allow women such as Ruth the means to break free from them.

While Jemima's jealousy reveals much about rivalry between women, it sheds even more light on Jemima's moral battle. Perhaps Jemima's greatest realization is the capacity for evil within her and her own moral weakness. As Jemima begins to see Ruth as a rival for Mr. Farquar's attentions, her jealousy mounts. Gaskell spends a great

deal of time developing Jemima's jealousy of Ruth "in this time of her sore temptation" (202). Struggling with strong emotional impulses causes Jemima to glimpse the "dark lurid gulf - the capability for evil, in her heart" (202). Although Jemima takes "pains to make her actions the same as formerly" because she "could not be hypocritical," Ruth feels the change in Jemima's emotions "acutely" (204). Jemima's emotional turmoil takes a toll on her physically as well as mentally: both Mrs. Bradshaw and Ruth observe that "Jemima [is] not looking well" (259). In addition, from Ruth's reaction to Jemima's altered treatment of her, we learn how much Ruth values Jemima's friendship, as "love was very precious to Ruth now, as in old time" (205). Gaskell takes pains to depict Jemima's jealousy of Ruth in order to amplify the change in attitude she experiences once she discovers the truth about Ruth's past.

Wollstonecraft and Gaskell illustrate that a sorority functions as an alliance. The protection that Maria promises to extend to Jemima in Wrongs of Woman is finally achieved in Ruth. Significantly, Jemima is the first person in Eccleston, with the exception of the Bensons, to discover Ruth's past. Immediately before Jemima mentally connects Ruth Denbigh to Ruth Hilton, Mrs. Pearson's words

reinforce society's judgment of women like Ruth: "what could become of her? Not that I know exactly [...] only one knows they can but go from bad to worse, poor creatures! God forgive me, if I am speaking too transiently of such degraded women, who, after all, are a disgrace to our sex" (264). Despite Mrs. Pearson's reiteration of the stigma prescribed to Ruth, Jemima is aware of the need to protect Ruth as she Although she feels she must ask another question of Mrs. Pearson, Jemima takes care to "ask it in an indifferent, careless tone, handling the bonnet while she spoke" (264). Jemima then rushes out of the shop, only to return a few minutes later under the guise of purchasing the bonnet. The purpose her return is to ask Mrs. Pearson not to "tell anyone the story [she] has told [her] this morning" (265). Jemima even goes on to stress that "there is nothing to conceal, only [she] must not speak about it" (265). While Jemima's handling of this discovery may be clumsy, it certainly shows that her priorities are to first solicit enough details to verify Mrs. Pearson's gossip, and then protect Ruth. Essentially, Jemima covers for Ruth with a lie, just as the Bensons do.

Jemima's desire to protect Ruth manifests itself even as she struggles to process this startling information.

Jemima, although "stunned and shocked by what she had received" (266), carefully considers the new knowledge she has before making any decisions as to what she should do with it. Gaskell wants to explore fully the way that Jemima deals with this discovery radically alters her perception of her world. As much as Jemima has "rebelled against these hard doctrines of her father's [. . .] their frequent repetition had had its effect, and led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with pity" (266). However, when Jemima considers what she has witnessed of Ruth's character up to this point, her unswerving goodness and kindness, the "very foundations of [her] belief in her mind [are] shaken" (268). Throughout the novel, Gaskell portrays Ruth as being exceedingly good, gentle and compassionate, despite the mistakes she makes in her youth. By bestowing on Ruth so many attractive qualities (attractive both to readers and to the society within the book) and then making her guilty of "wantonness" (277), Gaskell toys with the traditional notions of the wicked "fallen woman" and society's concept of what is true. Up until this point, Jemima, like most of society, seems to have been fairly competent in her moral discriminations, yet now we see her ask "Who is true? Who

is not? Who was good and pure? Who was not?" (268). The questions over which Jemima begins to agonize are the same questions with which Gaskell challenges her readers. Together with Jemima, readers attempt to find answers.

Jemima, who has grown up believing the opinions espoused by her father, begins to question them when confronted with a person like Ruth. Instead of accepting what others say about morals, she now tries to form her own opinions, yet is not exactly grateful for this loss of innocence, as she "upbraid[s] circumstance for having deprived her of unsuspicious happy ignorance" (270). Dorothy McGavran comments upon Gaskell's "ruthless attempt to change society's views of the fallen and unfallen woman," saying that she was "pulling [her world] to pieces"(42). We can see Gaskell's testing of Jemima's "nearest and dearest beliefs and prejudices" (McGavran 47) when Jemima wishes that "she might never be reminded, as she must be whenever she saw [Ruth] that such things were in this sunny, bright, lark-singing earth" (267). For Jemima, and for many readers, the world is just an easier place in which to live without an awareness of the problems that lurk right under the surface of a seemingly seamless

society. But, like Jemima, we are unable to go back to a state of innocence now.

Gaskell wisely chooses Jemima as an instrument of change. Because Jemima is the daughter of the house, not the son, not the father, many may underestimate her position. However, Gaskell chose Jemima precisely because of her pivotal position: the weight of Victorian ideals fell most strongly upon the daughters of the house. Indeed, "before marriage a young girl was brought up to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant" as the "predominant ideology of the age insisted that she have little sexual feeling at all." Furthermore, "morally she was left untested, and kept under the watchful eye of her mother in her father's home" (Vicinus ix). Jemima's experience with Ruth does test her morals: she emerges with knowledge of the world that she would otherwise not have had. Hence, her psychological struggle to interpret this information and then to respond with compassion and understanding is remarkable and revolutionary. After achieving her moral redemption, Ruth remains a somewhat static character; Jemima's realizations, however, result in a lasting change in her moral paradigm. Moreover, Jemima's extension of friendship and empathy to Ruth re-writes the

traditional plot of the marked woman's relationship with society.

Even in the midst of her turmoil, Jemima shows a complex understanding of the social situation women like Ruth must endure. Furthermore, she articulates a code vital to the success of sorority: women must hold each other to a high standard and act out of compassion, not competition. Jemima believes that if "[Ruth's] present goodness was real--if, after having striven back thus far on the heights, a fellow-woman was to throw her down into some terrible depth with her unkind, incontinent tongue, that would be too cruel!" (269). People like Mr. Bradshaw would concur with the conventional opinion that "any sexual deviation, whether active or passive, initiated a sequence which moved from the seduction and fall to decline (into prostitution and/or disease) and death; hence the saying 'once fallen, always fallen'"(Logan 34). Mr. Bradshaw would have no qualms about immediately exposing Ruth's secret because, to him, her initial mistake has already determined her destiny; her very nature is flawed. However, Jemima takes Ruth's present conduct into consideration and she concludes that "Whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now" (269). Furthermore,

Jemima emphasizes the supportive bond that she believes should exist between women when she says that it would be even more deplorable if it were a "fellow-woman" who betrayed Ruth's secret.

Although Jemima's compassion for Ruth is genuine, her knowledge of Ruth's past certainly grants her a degree of control over Ruth's plot. When Jemima recalls Mr. Farquar's interest in Ruth she feels the first twinges of pity: "With the thought of him came in her first merciful feelings towards Ruth" (267). Jemima's jealousy of Ruth has been building; if there were a perfect time for her to ruin any chance Ruth has with Mr. Farquar, it is now, yet Jemima says nothing. However, her recent attitude toward Ruth undergoes a drastic change: "now [Jemima] thought she could never more be jealous of [Ruth]. In her pride of innocence, she felt almost ashamed that such a feeling could have had existence" (268). Perhaps another reason that Jemima ceases to be jealous of Ruth is that, as much as she sympathizes with Ruth and understands the circumstances that have influenced her decisions in life, she realizes that these same circumstances mean that Ruth can no longer be a rival for Mr. Farquar's affections. With her new knowledge, Jemima is in control of the situation again, and

feels that "Come what might, Ruth was in her power" (269). While Jemima's "pride of innocence" (268) is humbled when she learns of the trials poor Ruth has had to endure, Jemima also realizes that Ruth is no longer any competition. While Jemima struggles between sympathy and dominance, her warm-hearted nature takes precedence and she uses her regained power to protect Ruth. Gaskell, who, of course, has ultimate control over the plot, places these two women in a position where they must re-negotiate the terms of their relationship now that they are no longer rivals. Jemima's rebellious streak shows itself earlier, but here before her father whole-heartedly defending Ruth, her inward moral matures and manifests itself in her outward actions.[10] In Ruth, one woman's defense of another is finally voiced and finally heard by the patriarchy, however unwelcome it is. When Mr. Bradshaw interrupts his children's lessons to confront Ruth, he instructs Jemima to "leave the room," yet she responds with "Why, father?" an "opposition that was strange even to herself." Yet Jemima "maintain[s] her ground, facing round upon her father" (277). From this moment on, gone is the sulky, emotion-wrought woman. Jemima, acting as both witness and judge, fully articulates a defense for Ruth, saying she has

"watched her" and if her "woman's instinct had ever been conscious of the faintest speck of impurity in thought, or word, or look," then her "contempt would have turned to loathing disgust" instead of "pity, and the stirrings of new-awakened love and most true respect" (278). Even though her father dismisses her testimony as an additional sign of the corruption that had infiltrated his household along with Ruth, Jemima "[stands] side by side with the wan Ruth" (278). From this moment on, Jemima's private and public support of Ruth never wavers.

Whereas in Wrongs of Woman the heterosexual relationship continually threatens the women's friendship, in Ruth Jemima's marriage to Mr. Farquar actually enables the women's intimacy to grow. While it is possible to see that she ultimately submits to convention by marrying Mr. Farquar, Jemima, rather than succumbing to the traditional marriage plot, uses this arrangement to her advantage. She is actually more likely to have increased independence with him than with her parents. Even Mr. Farquar seems to be aware that this realization might be Jemima's motivation to marry him when he asks, "Tell me [. . .] how much of your goodness to me, this last happy hour, has been owing to the desire of having more freedom as a wife than as a

daughter?" (307). By marrying, Jemima actually becomes even more similar to Gaskell, as the author herself is a married woman who assists stigmatized women to change their lives. Although Jemima does have affection for Mr. Farquar, she does not allow her marriage to dictate her sympathies or friendships. Jemima's marriage to Farquar actually serves to strengthen and facilitate sorority rather than impede or disrupt it.

While Gaskell spends much time developing the complex nature of the laws of the heart, she does not fail to address the hypocrisy of social codes. Whereas Wollstonecraft argues against the civil laws that imprison women, Gaskell reveals the discrepancies between man's law and God's law and the difference between morals and moralizing. According to Christian precepts, Ruth's fall should be forgiven and she can become a redeemed woman in the eyes of God. Men like Mr. Bradshaw, however, who take it upon themselves to condemn others, fail to recognize the supremacy of God's law. Besides the Bensons, Jemima is the only character who recognizes this hypocrisy. Unlike the scene in Wrongs of Woman, no quasi-courtroom trial in Ruth allows a woman to present her case to a patriarchal institution. Rather, Gaskell focuses on Jemima's judgment

of Ruth's moral character and the emotional and psychological trauma she undergoes to reach her verdict. Anticipating the swift and sure reaction of Eccleston, Jemima decides to say nothing about what she has learned "for now" (269). In Wrongs of Woman, females judge each other dispassionately, and try to ensure only their survival in an unjust system. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the overwhelming power of the laws, endorsed by people of the Church, that work against women. Conversely, Gaskell allows Ruth to work out her own reconciliation with God's law while she reveals the way society has narrowly misread it. Jemima's judgment of Ruth is not based on a system of black and white, civil or spiritual, maxims; rather, it is emotional and based on a thorough understanding of Ruth's character.[11]

An essential aspect of Jemima's awareness is a appreciation of social advantages and the effect that material circumstances have on the individual. Supplementing her focus on the spiritual redemption of the marked woman, Gaskell indicates the social difficulties that often determine or greatly influence people's life decisions. The author uses Jemima as the interpreter of Ruth's current moral condition. Gradually in Victorian

society, "the problem of fallen women was beginning to be recognized as a socio-economic, rather than moral, issue" (Logan 28). Ruth's predicament is not at all a question of proper morals; ironically, her being good or evil is beside the point. In Ruth, Jemima learns that individual circumstances, such as social class, home environment, parental protection (or lack thereof), directly affect the choices that one may make. Early in the novel, Gaskell gives us a hint of the social forces that shape character:

> The traditions of those bygone times, even to the smallest social particular, enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes - when an inward necessity for independent individual action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. (6)

Influenced by environment and thus "absorbed" into the social plot, Jemima and Ruth are trapped in situations that

place great importance on class structure and moral acceptability. Gaskell illustrates moments in both Ruth's and Jemima's lives when they respond triumphantly to this "inward necessity for individual action."

In a remarkable passage, Jemima compares her own situation to Ruth's. Ruth's situation "made [Jemima] think of [herself] and what [she is]" (299). Jemima professes that "with a father and mother, and home and careful friends, [she was] not likely to be tempted like Ruth" (299). Essentially, Jemima realizes the different consequences between the course Ruth's plot and her own. Additionally, Gaskell echoes Wollstonecraft's sentiments in Wrongs of Woman regarding motherhood. "In Ruth, [Gaskell] illustrates the worst that can befall a Victorian heroine and suggests that Ruth's seduction comes because she lacks a mother's love and guidance" (Mauer 40). Gaskell has been leading up to Jemima's understanding that her social environment has been very different from Ruth's, and that this difference has influenced the choices they have made. In a sense, then, Jemima initiates a heightened level of understanding between social classes. Ruth was born into circumstances differing significantly from those of Bradshaws. When Jemima learns the truth about Ruth's past,

she pities rather than condemns her. More importantly, Jemima is humbled because she realizes that she is fortunate to have been born into a life of relative privilege, and to have received the guidance, however overbearing, of two caring parental figures. However much we may dislike Mr. Bradshaw, it is clear that one of his primary concerns is his family. Ruth never had this protection.

Jemima's self-realizations and her discoveries of worldly truths distinguish her from Ruth. After realizing her error with Bellingham, Ruth remains a fairly static character. Jemima's beliefs, however, range from one extreme to the next until she finally finds balance and peace with herself and her world.

Earthly peace, however, is denied to Ruth as society's condemnation of her remains strong. While Christian precepts proffer ready forgiveness for those who ask, society demands surer proof of spiritual rehabilitation. Ironically, the penitence a fallen woman must perform to attain social acceptance exceeds that demanded by Christ.[12] "When the truth about Ruth's past circulates in the community, she is ostracized and outcast; but, after an epidemic during which she nurses the ill and dying for many

weeks, she earns her neighbors' love and respect once again" (Logan 38). All Eccleston dismisses her and Leonard, except the Bensons and Jemima. In order to appreciate what Gaskell is doing with Jemima's character, it is important to realize that Jemima extends her friendship to Ruth more than ever after society condemns her and before Ruth redeems herself during the epidemic. Jemima's relationship with Ruth actually grows stronger after Ruth's secret is exposed. Not only does Jemima regard her friendship with Ruth as being mutual, she also perceives that it is actually her duty to assist Ruth in her time of need.

Significantly, Jemima's support of Ruth and continued friendship with her extend beyond the private sphere into the public domain. Jemima expresses her awareness of her new duty when she meets Mr. Benson on the street shortly after Ruth's past comes to light. The Bensons, who believe it best if Jemima not visit their house, say her "clear duty" (299) is to obey her parents. Yet Jemima, although she struggles to articulate her new, sympathetic attitude toward Ruth's plight, disagrees that this is her duty now. Instead, she says that if she can "be of any use or comfort to any of you--especially to Ruth" that she would "come,

duty or not." Then Jemima hurriedly moves on to explain that she believes "it would be [her] duty" (299) to come. Jemima's concern for Ruth, which she now terms a duty, is not something she will discontinue for the sake of filial piety. When she tells Mr. Benson that she thinks "[he] did the right thing about poor Ruth" (299), Jemima openly and publicly goes against her father, who has made it quite clear that he disapproves of the Bensons involvement with Ruth.

Friendship with Jemima offers Ruth interaction not only with another woman but also with society. Hereafter, Jemima does her best to bring Ruth out of herself. When she first visits Ruth after the scene at her father's house, right before she departs for her honeymoon with Mr. Farquar, she expresses her hope "to see [Ruth] often" (317). Jemima's knowledge of Ruth's past has not dictated her opinion; rather, Jemima respects her all the more for having changed. While Thurston and Faith praise Ruth's spiritual rehabilitation, they seem at a loss when discussing her earthly welfare. Jemima alone recognizes Ruth's value as a member of society.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Jemima's intervention is her attempt to tell Ruth's story

differently. When discussing employment opportunities, Jemima offers Ruth several options that deviate from the paths taken by the conventional stigmatized woman. Usually, ostracized women took up either prostitution or nursing; their options remained limited. And, while Ruth says that she has a "gift" for "being about sick and helpless people," Jemima denies that she is "fitted for it" (318). Jemima is not implying that Ruth would not be an adequate nurse; rather, Jemima is calling attention to the fact that Ruth is "fitted for something better." Jemima goes on to say, "Why, Ruth, you are better educated than I!" (318). While we might be tempted to dismiss Jemima's suggestions as the naïve ideas of a young girl who underestimates the difficulty of Ruth's situation, it is more likely that Gaskell uses Jemima's appreciation of Ruth's skills to society's disparagement of "fallen women." As Laura Hapke has noted, "Sororal rather than paternal treatment encouraged women who wished to reform to be self-sufficient as well"(19). Unlike the Farquars and Bellinghams of this world, Jemima (and Gaskell) do not see Ruth's past as limiting her future choices and potential. Jemima encourages her to have high ambitions because she believes

that Ruth can alter her circumstances and actually climb upward on the social ladder.

Jemima offers a revision of employment possibilities for Ruth and the type of woman she represents but also attempts to re-write a story of Ruth, which, like the one in the Old Testament, ends well. Right after Ruth's heroic efforts during the epidemic, Jemima tries to "persuade [her] to come to Abermouth for a few weeks" (356). Attempting to entice Ruth with descriptions of the "sunny days, and the still evenings, that [they] will have together" (356). Ruth "smile[s] at the happy picture that Jemima [draws]," and, for a moment, both women see this "hopeful prospect before them" (356). Via Jemima, Gaskell presents us with a new way of ending the traditional tale of the marked woman. Jemima sees Ruth as a social equal, a participant in a valorized sorority.

However, Ruth has no Abermouth. Almost immediately after Jemima departs for Wales, Mr. Davis, the physician, discloses to Ruth that Mr. Donne, her seducer, is deathly ill. She leaves to nurse him, dying as a result of her efforts. Victorian society and the society within the novel might see Ruth's death as punishment for her earlier sins. However much God's law promises to redeem her, man's law

holds her apart from society, forever a stigmatized woman. For some, however, Ruth's death apparently weakens the novel. For example, after reading Ruth, Charlotte Bronte asked, "Why should she [Ruth] die?" (qtd. in Ganz 108).[13] In a similar vein, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to Gaskell: "I am grateful to you as a woman for having treated such a subject--was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should die? I had that thought of regret in closing the book --Oh, I must confess to it--pardon me for the tears' sake" (qtd. in Schor 170). Ruth seems to die for plot's sake. Curiously, either these experienced women writers fail to understand why Ruth must die or they are feigning ignorance. Perhaps their disappointment and confusion over the ending indicate that these writers find themselves caught in similar plots that promote secrecy and insecurity even within the sorority.

The stories of Ruth and Jemima "mutually illuminate" one another (Craik 54). Together, Gaskell uses them to challenge Victorian stereotypes of fallen women. McGavran says that "Ruth represents for Victorian readers a 'pulling to pieces' of their complacent condemnation of the exclusive 'sins' of fallen women" (40). Gaskell concentrates on Jemima's struggle over how to interpret

Ruth's past in order to illustrate just how cruel society's condemnation is. Jemima's careful consideration of Ruth's past and present conduct, and the circumstances that influenced her decisions, expose the complexity of the social and environmental factors that influence people's lives. Gaskell spends so much time exploring Jemima's complex emotions precisely so we can see her work through this difficult moral dilemma. In keeping with a Christian tradition, Jemima sees the redemptive worth of human struggle. Thus, Ruth, struggling to improve her situation and her son's, dies but saves others' lives. In Ruth, Gaskell poses many questions, including "How can human lives be best represented to save rather than condemn?" (McGavran 47). Despite Ruth's death at the end of the novel, hope for a more forgiving, less hypocritical society lives on in characters such as Thurston, Faith, and Jemima. It is Jemima's humble and sympathetic attitude toward stigmatized women that Gaskell desires for society to emulate.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf writes that virtually all women in literary history "are shown in their relation to men" (56). In Wrongs of Woman and Ruth we are presented with two books in which women form relationships with other women. Genuine communication between women begins with Maria and Jemima. Their alliance, while not enacting solutions to escape the infernal plot, reveals the way women have had to wrong other women in order to survive. Wollstonecraft uses Maria and Darnford to reveal the dangers women face if they continue to see their lives only in relation to men. Gaskell's Ruth rejects the heterosexual marriage plot when she refuses Bellingham and then attempts an alternate course with her friend's encouragement. Although this course cannot yet be enacted in society, Jemima, the inheritor of Ruth's story, becomes the woman, mother, and wife who can re-tell Ruth's story in a different way. While it seems that neither character has broken the bonds of narrative and social plotting, hope lies in the minds of conscientious readers who may re-see women's stories and stories about women. The best and worse laid plots are ultimately in the minds of readers as well as writers.

Although, within the two novels, only Jemima envisions a truly different plot for women like Ruth, readers nevertheless inherit another potential story which includes a better conclusion for all women. Jemima carries Ruth in her heart and head, demonstrating that this sorority is not only public (and often secretive) but also for the living and the dead. As authors and as women, Wollstonecraft and Gaskell depict female characters whose powerful bonds might give them a slightly better chance of surviving the plots against them and ultimately articulating their own. If women can escape the "infernal plot," they increase their chances of a creativity that is more "becoming" and remarkable.

NOTES

[1]Whereas Maria and Jemima's relationship has received much critical attention, Jemima and Ruth's friendship in Gaskell's novel has not. In Women's Friendship in Literature, Todd addresses Maria and Jemima's relationship in Wrongs of Woman, terming it a political friendship wherein each party struggles to secure her own interests.

[2]"Fallen woman" is a highly inflammable, derogatory misnomer. The so-called fallen woman is almost invariably betrayed, dispossessed and / or persecuted. She virtually never falls to the moral level of a scoundrel such as Venables. That female critics themselves so often refer to "fallen woman" indicates conscientious writers have to use a pernicious language because the infernal plot resists an easy cure. Trying to avoid being implicated in a lingering 18th-century morality, I will avoid using the expression "fallen woman."

[3]Upon original publication of this collection in London of 1798, Wollstonecraft's text is entitled The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria; a Fragment. Upon subsequent publication in Philadelphia in 1799, the title was reversed to read

Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman. For this paper, I will refer to the text as Wrongs of Woman.

[4]For an in-depth discussion of the history of marriage laws in Britain, see Hill.

[5]Many critics have commented on similarities between Maria's relationship with Darnford and Wollstonecraft's relationship with her lover Imlay. For a complete biography and discussion of Wollstonecraft's love affair with Imlay, see Janet Todd's Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life.

[6]For a complete discussion of the contents of and reaction to Godwin's biography, see Caine.

[7]Waters writes that "one of Gaskell's letters demonstrates that she was at least familiar with that well-known feminist's work" (14). Letters, 25a, casually mentions adapting a sentence out of Wollstonecraft. (19).

[8]In the same article, Waters also contends that one of Gaskell's shorter works, "Morton Hall," serves as "a brief illustration of Gaskell's reception of Wollstonecraft's ideas" (14).

[9]For in depth discussions of the Bensons' spiritual influence on Ruth see Schor.

[10]Jemima Bradshaw's namesake in the Old Testament occurs in Job 42:14. Here, Jemima is a daughter of Job after his trials when he achieves a greater understanding of God's ways.

[11]For a complete comparison between Gaskell's Ruth and the Biblical Ruth, see Wheeler.

[12]For an example of the compassion commanded by Christ, see John 8. 1-11. Here, the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman taken in adultery. In response to the Pharisees' plan to stone her, Jesus says they should consider their own shortcomings before condemning her.

[13]For a detailed discussion of various critics' and authors' reaction to Ruth's death, see Ganz.

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